

MOORE, MAURICE, M.F.A. Discovering Through the Act of Making. (2011)  
Directed by Jennifer Meanley. 14pp.

My drawing subject is the human form. I focus on my own body in my large scale charcoal collage drawings and free-writing text pieces. I also work from direct observation and invention. I am actively searching for ways to express my gender identity and sexuality. With the drawing, collage and free writing, I broaden my notions of what it means to reconstruct while I simultaneously deconstruct the human form. Creating the form in public reveals how it is created. The materials and public performance further aid me in my quest to establish and maintain my identity as a gay black male. I am attempting to dissect and explore each facet of what it means to be a gay person and a person of color in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

DISCOVERING THROUGH THE ACT OF MAKING

By

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A Thesis Submitted  
to the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2011

Approved by

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Committee Chair

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### DISCOVERING THROUGH THE ACT OF MAKING

My drawing subject is the human form. I focus on my own body in my large scale charcoal collage drawings and free-writing text pieces. I also work from direct observation and invention. I am actively searching for ways to express my gender identity and sexuality. With the drawing, collage and free writing, I broaden my notions of what it means to reconstruct while I simultaneously deconstruct the human form. Creating the form in public reveals how it is created. The materials and public performance further aid me in my quest to establish and maintain my identity as a gay black male. I am attempting to dissect and explore each facet of what it means to be a gay person and a person of color in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With this body of work I am not simply asking to be seen and accepted, I am screaming it. These drawings are not about a fixed stagnant identity, or in my case identities; this work is about passage. The drawings are about time: moments down to the seconds. For example: the monumental moments in my life range from the choice I made not to kill myself, to stop the self-mutilation, and ask for help. With my work I want to show the courage it takes to admit these shameful truths to myself as well as society, coupled with the stigmas that are indelibly attached to them. These drawings are about an identity that is fluid. Identities are plural like the flow of thought through our consciousness. The fluidity of these types of identities is borne out of a need to survive oppression.

This type of oppression intersects, it is intertwined, and it functions on many levels. The problem is that queer people are not just defined by one aspect of who we inherently are. As homosexuals, some of us have the ability to easily pass. Some of us are able to disguise ourselves, thus escaping from the possibility of violence and oppression.

My thoughts are contradictory and they can be painfully violent while simultaneously euphoric. My thoughts have become increasingly harder to understand, articulate and justify, and it has been very challenging to convey these things to most people. Can you try to think of just what it would be like to wonder each and every day, "Is today my last day solely because of the fact that I am a homosexual?" Believe me, these are questions I have asked myself a million times. Questions such as: will they come for me now? Will they finally kill me today? Probably the most shameful question for me has been, "Would I even fight back?" Would I have enough self-worth to fight back? The way I have chosen to begin to answer this question has been through art. More specifically, through drawing.

Drawing has been a way for me to cope, understand and come to terms with many of these harsh realities that plague most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I just know to my very core that art has something to offer. Art has power. Art can be used to bring about change. Even if that change has only been felt by me. Art has given me the means to find my voice: my true voice. Art has given a voice to people like me who would otherwise be forgotten. I can see it in my drawings. I can feel my voice when I am making my drawings. I can even rip my voice apart as I tear into my drawings. It is there, the voice or the something that can't quite be named. Maybe I can name it embodiment.

Over the course of two years in graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I can more objectively look with a new set of eyes at my body of work. I have come to the realization that the biggest source of my problems was that I did not know how to see. I had to learn to see. I was not even trying to see. I was merely idly watching. When I say “see,” I mean the act of looking. I must make it active. There must be action. I am not just talking about seeing with my eyes alone. I am speaking of a type of seeing that is to be done with the whole body, which includes all my senses. Using my whole body both physically and mentally, to make the work as well a depiction of my body. The subject matter of the drawing begins to engage with complex issues of identity in a way that is much more direct because of this way of thinking.

My notions of drawing and just what that word means began to broaden because of the usage of the whole body. With that change I began to see yet another problem for myself which was that I was not asking any questions. I was not questioning myself in an honest way about drawing. I was trying to answer everyone else’s questions about drawing, and I did more than just put my own questions on the back burner. These questions include: What is a drawing? How big does a drawing have to be? What does a drawing have to do or what should it be made on? Does the drawing have to be archival? Does work being made to last mean that I care any more about it? Can a drawing fill a space: literally fill the space? Is a drawing still a drawing if the drawing is not executed by one’s own hands? I have made many mistakes here; I did not let the questions properly form and give myself time to figure things out, as well as just how they fit into my work. I also thought that the questions needed

answers! I was foolish, and naïve enough to believe that I was actually going to figure out everything in just two years or with one drawing. I thought I had to have the answer to the questions solved before I even began the pieces, and know where the work was going before it was even made.

Drawing did not truly open up for me until I stopped over-thinking, until I just shut up and listened to what the drawing was telling me. I don't mean that the drawing actually came to life and verbally told me what to do. I mean that the drawing told me what to do visually by, looking at the work, actually touching the work, getting closer and closer to the work. I had to push to a more fully develop my rendering of the entire figure. With each new discovery another problem or question arose. Sometimes this happened because of practical reasons such as needing more space to work. At other times this came out of the need to make things more challenging. I have had to find many ways to work, but the best ways I found come out of my fears and insecurities. I needed ways of working that made me vulnerable. To be honest, working in public scares me, and being exposed all the time feels like a violation. I am in a way, used to being violated. Now, I guess the circumstances have changed. Through this process I have realized the power of my own voice and feel ready to take control over my own identity. Making the work in public has allowed me to realize this.

Yes, the art object is important, but I want to consider when the object becomes important. Is it when the object is finished or started? I believe the object is most important when it is vulnerable. My drawings, in my opinion, are most vulnerable and most raw in the middle where there is gray. Creating ambiguity and uncertainty brings me back to this idea



of not knowing. The idea in my work is alive in the middle. The idea is living in the middle and to live in the middle.

I needed to see that the very act of drawing in itself was a way of thinking. William Kentridge made this evident when he said,

What does it mean to say something is a drawing – as opposed to a fundamentally different form, such as a photograph? First of all, arriving at the image is a process, not a frozen instant. Drawing for me is about fluidity. There may be a vague sense of what you're going to draw but things occur during the process that may modify, consolidate or shed doubts on what you know. So drawing is a testing of ideas; a slow-motion version of thought. It does not arrive instantly like a photograph. The uncertain and imprecise way of constructing a drawing is sometimes a model of how to construct meaning. What ends in clarity does not begin that way. (p. 8)

I have gone back to these words time and time again. Every time I read these words I discover something new. The last line in the quote, “What ends in clarity does not begin that way,” I have taken to mean to not know what the work is or will be from the start of the piece.

What is drawing? What does it mean to draw? Drawing is more than just making marks, more than materials and more than the execution of an idea or concept, or the making of an art object. It is the entire experience of drawing that makes the piece, not a single drawing as an experience, but drawing as the experience. I as a maker cannot have the idea from the start of the piece, because it will interfere with the discovery of drawing. The way of working without knowing the end result is crucial to the whole experience itself. I cannot discover or experience something if I already know what it is. However, you can re-

experience something or re-discover something through the act of not knowing. You will interact with your subject matter in a completely different way. Your perception of the subject is changed every time you draw, because you approach the work from the angle of not knowing. This is why there is repetition of the body and or bodies in my work. I am constantly searching for it, the something.

I keep the materials simple and limited to just charcoal, paper, glue and erasers. As I draw, the complexities of these simple tools flow through. How they react to each other, as well as their interaction with me is what gives the work its spark. The paper that has been glued, torn and sometimes re-torn, then re-glued, is hanging from the ceiling, to the wall, and down to the floor. What is most fascinating to me, is the history of the paper. The paper holds its history firmly and boldly and at times with ease. At other times the history of the marks and scars are hidden. The paper is strong and weak. It can hold everything one moment and then it breaks down and is barely able to hold anything.

When I apply the glue I do not use a brush or sponge. I remember the whole experience of drawing is what matters. I am not just preparing my paper, I am drawing. I must feel everything from both a physical and emotional standpoint. I apply the glue, sometimes squeezing it in blasts, which create isolated pockets of glue on the paper. At other times I hold the bottle, letting it drip slowly into my hand, then I add more pressure to the bottle and a thick white stream flows into the palm of my hand. Upon contact with my skin, the glue is cold to the touch. Then it warms from the heat of my body and I no longer notice its temperature. Look! Once again I have squeezed out too much glue; it is running down the

sides of my hands. The glue falls onto the floor in little puddles. I have worked with these materials long enough to know that I should slap and smear it all over the paper, as soon as the glue touches my hands. What is created is a texture that can be seen and literally felt while I making my drawing. The tactility comes in once again.

When I draw, the tactile feeling as well as the emotional feeling must both be present in my process. From the actual charcoal in my hands as I pull it across the surface of the paper, to how it looks as the mark is being made, to the very sound of the charcoal itself, and the vibrations: all of these things are part of the experience. Upon opening myself up to these experiences, I unconsciously give myself permission to be reckless, violent and even aggressive, I get to become a sort of living drawing. I can forget everything, and just for a second get to not be the other, the outsider.

CHAPTER II

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

“Touch Me.... Try Please”; Ink on Paper, 2010, 8.5” x 11”

“Dick”; 6 of 5, Ink on Paper, 2011, 8.5 x 11”

“Heavy Cross”; Collage, 2011, 6ft x 5ft

“I Can’t Carry It All On My Own It’s Killing Me!”; Ink on Paper, 2011,  
8.5 x 11

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